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Even environmentalists in Hungary support nuclear energy

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Ivan Baba and Judit Vasamezyi are leaders of Hungary's growing independent environmentalist movement — and yet they refuse to fight against nuclear power.

"We need nuclear energy," Mr. Baba says. "There's no public opinion here against it," Mrs. Vasamezyi adds.

Their statements suggest that nascent antinuclear movements in the East bloc are unlikely to be mobilized by the Soviet nuclear disaster. Facing a critical energy shortage, governments throughout the region see nuclear power as the only feasible solution.

Hungary is typical. Official press reports limited coverage of the accident to a few paragraphs. Only after neighboring Austria said its radiation levels were above normal did the government admit that Hungary also suffered from "a slight increase" in such nuclear levels.

Even then, officials continued to downplay the Soviet accident, saying no precautions needed to be taken. They explained that the largest amounts of radi-

ation traveled over northern Europe away from the country, and they added that Hungary's own nuclear plant in Paks is of a later, safer design. Instead of the flammable Chernobyl-type graphite reactor, the Hungarian plant, like most other East European and Western ones, uses pressurized water to slow down the neutrons in the fuel.

"We have taken many more security steps than in the Soviet Union and incorporated many Western design elements," assured Jozsef Bog-nar, director of the World Economics Institute. "This accident won't stop our efforts to develop nuclear power."

Hungary needs nuclear energy to make up an energy shortage. Like other East European countries, its imported Soviet oil remains expensive, at around \$22 a barrel. That price is set at the average of the past five year's world price.

Hungary's main domestic fuel source,

also like other East European countries, is low-quality brown coal. It is dirty to burn and getting harder to mine. Throughout the region, coal production has either stabilized or is declining.

"The only solution is nuclear power," says Tibor Laczai Szabo, deputy general

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The US Central Intelligence Agency

director of the Ministry of Industry. Indeed, according to a report prepared by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, "nuclear power production has been the one bright spot in [East Europe's] energy picture over the past few years, with output doubling

since 1978." The CIA says "three countries — Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and GDR [East Germany] — produce an appreciable share of their electricity from Soviet-designed nuclear power plants."

Hungary is catching up fast. According to Mr. Laczai Szabo, the Paks plant already produces 14 percent of Hungary's electricity. With two more blocs under construction, Laczai Szabo says that figure is planned to grow to 25 percent by 1987. Four additional reactors are planned to be built in the 1990s, meaning that nuclear power will supply between 40 percent and 50 percent of the nation's electricity by the turn of the century.

With large sums already invested, East-bloc officials refuse to consider canceling nuclear projects. They say their budgets are too tight. "The Austrians build a 4 billion schilling [\$300 million] nuclear plant and then stop it from operating," marvels Laczai Szabo. "We don't have that money to waste."

So unlike democratic Austria, no East-bloc country lets its citizens vote on nuclear power — or even engage in a public debate. That is one reason Hungarian environmentalists such as Mr. Baba and Mrs. Vasamezyi don't plan to organize an antinuclear movement.

"It's hopeless to oppose nuclear power here," explains Baba. "Nuclear power is a taboo. It belongs to the most secret of areas in a communist country, and because it is built with help from the Soviet Union, it also means challenging the Soviet Union."